

# Evangelical Crises and Everyday Life

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On July 11th, 2015, a man walked down Pearl Street Mall in Boulder, Colorado, pressing a collapsible plastic step stool and two signs between his right arm and his torso. After stopping to survey his surroundings, he unfolded the small stool and carefully placed it on the brick walkway, centering it on the glass entryway of the building behind him. Above the entrance the words “Court House” were carved in stone. He leaned one sign against the side of the stool, “JESUS SAVES,” and placed the other on the opposite side, “Evolution is a LIE, JESUS is LIFE.” He emptied his backpack behind the portable pulpit: a bottle of water, a Bible, some sunscreen, and several hundred pamphlets wrapped in two rubber bands. After twisting open the bottle and taking a drink of water, he kneeled on the sidewalk and prayed in silence for several minutes as people politely walked by him, parting like redirected tributaries. Amidst the murmur of the passing crowd, the man caught a single word from a woman’s mouth, perhaps directed at him, probably not. He stepped up on his stool, extended his Bible toward the woman and punctuated the hum of the sidewalk... “Justice!?”

Justice!? Stay there for one minute, ma’am. One minute! You know what? I love the word “justice.” Cause you know what? You know what it means? Jesus Christ... Listen... This is the beauty—this is the beauty of the gospel. Jesus Christ went to the cross and satisfied *justice* so that we could go free. Your sin and my sin, the sin of everybody here, everybody on the planet that has lived since the beginning of time... Our sins are *crying out* to God for his *justice* to be punished. Here’s the question I have for you...[1]

The woman who had unintentionally served as a catalyst for the street preacher’s thesis on justice had since crossed the street and disappeared into The Cheesecake Factory, her place in the newly established congregation filled by the flow of anonymous and uninterested side-walkers.

...are your sins going to be punished in an ugly body, built to withstand the horrors of hell? Or are your sins going to be cleaned by the blood of Christ? That’s how good God is, that he loves *filthy* sinners like me. That he would send his son *to bleed* and *die*, in my place, to satisfy *justice* so that I could go free. Isn’t that amazing? That ev—that even our best attempts to get right before God are the equivalent of a filthy rag! Sir, do you understand? We deserve to die! We’ve lived like animals, consuming everything in our flesh, in our wickedness, in our immorality, in our drink and our drug, in our *filthy* lifestyle! We deserve to die!

As the man continued to weave together the relationship between filth, mortality, and justice, his audience continued shopping, walking, and talking. I sat cross-legged on the brick nearby, caught up in the palpable awkwardness emerging out of the meeting of sincere urgency and complete indifference.

Like the hero of Friedrich Nietzsche's "Parable of the Madman," who ran to the marketplace with lantern in hand to warn the public of the death of God—the "tremendous event" that had yet to be seen or heard—contemporary street preachers are moved to public performance in a desperate attempt to alert the public of an impending crisis (181). As if to prefigure the frustration of street preachers, Nietzsche tells us that the madman's speech "provoked much laughter" among those who did not believe in God (181). However, despite their striking similarities, street preachers have tasked themselves not with the proclamation of a dead God, but of a living God—a proclamation accompanied by an unapologetic critique of contemporary American culture. During these performances, unassuming and ordinary things are resignified as objects of anxiety, as filth. In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant suggests that since the 1990s, the idea of the "crisis" has become "a heightening interpretive genre, rhetorically turning an ongoing condition into an intensified situation in which extensive threats to survival are said to dominate the reproduction of life" (7). The stretched out temporality of everyday life is no longer occasionally punctuated by crises, but is composed of them, a state that Berlant refers to as "crisis ordinariness."<sup>[2]</sup> While the concept of crisis ordinariness offers a novel framework for making sense of economic and political life, it extends far beyond these spheres, organizing, among other things, the tenuous relationship between evangelical Christianity and the wider popular and public cultures of the United States. "We've lived like animals, consuming everything in our flesh, in our wickedness, in our immorality, in our drink and our drug, in our *filthy* lifestyle! We deserve to die!" As the preacher delivered this line, nearly keeling over as he sentenced the strangers around him to death, he was surrounded by the most unremarkable routines: droves of casual and content walkers, a family sampling shaved ice from a street vendor, a man with a guitar singing Elton John's "Tiny Dancer," a case full of coins and dollar bills at his feet.

In a theological instantiation of the genre of crisis, the ongoing conditions of life in an affluent town—including secularism, pluralism, leisure, higher education, and consumer capitalism—appear to certain evangelicals as both ongoing and unprecedented catastrophes, literally apocalyptic in scale. While these anxious feelings are amplified and made public in the dramatic performances of street preachers, they also provide a wide-ranging affective tenor of the evangelical movement, a tenor that sits in tension with evangelicalism's dominant position among religious communities in the United States. As Ann Pellegrini notes, evangelicals' "feeling of marginalization remains active and galvanizing despite the undeniable impact conservative Christianity has had on electoral politics and policymaking in the United States over the past two decades" (215). These two observations—that evangelicals often feel marginalized and that the evangelical movement has been and remains a powerful ideological force—are difficult to reconcile so long as they are conceived of as a simple disconnect between individual feelings and social-political realities. Their coupling becomes intelligible, however, when they are understood as a kind of genre takeover. Contemporary evangelicalism is given form and animated by the genre of crisis, an idea that can, in Berlant's words, "distort something structural and ongoing within ordinariness into something that seems shocking and exceptional" (7). This distortion is capable of effortlessly transforming shopping malls into filth, challenges to Protestant hegemony into the persecution of Christians, and natural disasters into signs of the end times, straddling, and in some cases inverting, the commonly accepted

categories of the mundane and the spectacular.

## NOTES

1. Transcriptions of preaching are produced from video documentation take by the author during fieldwork with three evangelical street-preaching troupes in Boulder and Denver, Colorado, in 2015.

2. More specifically, the concept of crisis ordinariness casts “the ordinary as an impasse shaped by crisis in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on” (7). Therefore, the term refers to both crises as events, as well as the strategies that people develop to live through (or continuously within) these events.

## WORKS CITED

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